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ABSTRACT

As minority groups, civil rights activists, and legislators push for cultural pluralism to replace the melting pot concept, the school counselor's role expands to include advocating and defending human rights. This study investigated religious practices in public schools, the perceptions of teachers regarding such practices, and the existence and use of guidelines related to religious-related activities. Teachers (N=93) who were enrolled in university education courses at California State University, Stanislaus, completed a questionnaire by indicating whether or not each of 20 specific events occurred in their schools and whether they thought such events should occur. Four additional items assessed whether teachers had guidelines regarding appropriate religious-related activities, whether they followed such guidelines, and whether they would follow such guidelines if developed. The results indicated that, although a majority of respondents wanted more religious-related activities, most reported abiding by the law concerning prayer and Bible reading in the schools. Only 21.5% of respondents indicated they had guidelines related to appropriate religious-related activities and over 50% of respondents thought such guidelines should be developed. Counselors should help administrators and teachers recognize the importance of protecting minority students' rights and developing guidelines to ensure such protection. Counselors must promote the development of a school environment that welcomes all individuals and encourages religious liberty. (NB)

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Religious Freedom: A Human Rights Concern for Counselors

by

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Religion Freedom: A Human Rights Concern for Counselors

Recently, in a fieldwork seminar class, I requested that students interview counselors in the field regarding how they worked with minority students. The assignment involved reporting back to class the following week and sharing ideas, techniques and suggestions. I was surprised when one student related a story in which the interviewed counselor defined the progress made by one of his Asian counselees in terms of assimilation. The counselor stated that during the first year in this country the counselee did not celebrate Christmas, but this year the counselee did! Such an occurrence was seen as progress. When I expressed my surprise and dissatisfaction with trying to "Christianize" minorities, another student in the class stated, "Christmas is an American holiday, not a religious one!"

I thought that times and attitudes had changed, but have they? About 20 to 30 years ago, schools were seen as the vehicle used to "Americanize" children. The goal was to make everyone alike, to eliminate unique cultural differences, to "melt down" ethnic groups so youngsters could become true Americans with American values, language, religion, and goals (Benjamin, 1985). Assimilate was the goal; discriminate the "rule." As Benjamin (1985) aptly states:

Teachers rarely concerned themselves with thoughts of individual differences. "So what if Mario cannot speak English as well as the other students? If he wants to be American, he has to learn English! No matter that some children in my

class are Jewish, Moslem and Buddhist.

Christianity is America's religion! We will read the Bible and pray, regardless of their beliefs and complaints. No matter that Native American students in my class might have another view concerning Columbus Day! We will continue to celebrate the 'true' founding of this great nation. (p. 80)

In recent years, however, minority groups, civil rights activists and legislators have pushed for the concept of cultural pluralism to replace the melting pot. The counselor role now includes being an advocate for and defender of human rights. It is no longer acceptable to forbid a child to speak a language other than English in a classroom. In fact, we have bilingual education. It is no longer acceptable to exclude all handicapped children from the regular classroom. In fact, we have mainstreaming. It is no longer acceptable to discriminate against a child because of sex, race, or religion. We have diversity as the desired norm. Times and laws have changed, but have attitudes? Are teachers sensitive to individual differences other than academic ones? Do teachers or others in the schools still lead children in reading the Bible and prayers in schools, despite the laws? Do teachers accept diversity in religion?

Schultz (1983) reports that each year during the Christmas season, schools seem to transform. Decorations, gifts, parties, pageants and singing of Christmas carols occur with little concern for those who do not celebrate Christmas. Frequently, non-Christian parents contact the school in protest of these practices. Some feel that their children are being evangelized in school. Others are concerned that their children feel left out. Still, others cite the issue of separation of church and state and the violation of the First Amendment.

Are the schools violating the law? Do administrators and counselors "look the other way" until challenged? Do teachers have guidelines to follow? Obtaining answers to questions such as these served as the impetus for designing the present study. More specifically, the study was designed to investigate: (a) the prevalence of religious practices in public schools, (b) the perceptions of teachers regarding what they think should occur in this area, and (c) the existence and use of guidelines related to appropriate and inappropriate religious-related activities.

Method

Questionnaire

In order to obtain the needed information, a questionnaire was developed. Initially, preservice teachers were asked to respond to an openended survey and write about

occurrences they remembered in their personal experiences in school. Based on these responses and a review of the literature related to the constitutionality of religious-related activities in the schools, an initial questionnaire was developed. This questionnaire was modified at the suggestion of five professors of education, and the final form resulted in an instrument in which respondents indicated "yes" or "no" to whether an event occurred and responded separately whether they thought a specific activity should occur. Based on court decisions described in the literature, 11 of the 20 items involved unconstitutional activities; 4 of the items involved permissible activities; and 5 items involved activities in which legal decisions, did not occur, were not clear, or were contradictory from one state to another. Four additional items were used to assess whether teachers had guidelines regarding appropriate religious-related activities, whether they follow such guidelines, and whether they would follow guidelines if developed.

Participants

Participants in the present study consisted of 107 post-baccalaureate students enrolled in five education courses at California State University, Stanislaus. Of the 107 respondents, two persons who worked as substitutes, one person who worked in a pre-kindergarten, and one individual

who worked at a junior college were eliminated from the sample. In addition, ten persons who worked at parochial schools were excluded from the study. This selection reduced the number of respondents to 93 (65 female, 28 males). These individuals had the following characteristics: 36 taught in grades k-3; 21 taught in grades 4-6; 10 taught in grades 7-9; 17 in grades 10-12; and 9 taught in "other" category in areas such as special education, or resource specialists. The age ranged as follows: 27 were aged 21-30; 48 were aged 31-40; 15 were aged 41-50; 2 were 51-60 and 1 person was over 61 years of age. Religious preferences included 26 Catholics, 1 Jehovah Witness, 3 Jews, 3 Mormons, 1 Moslem, 53 Protestants, 1 Sikh, and 13 who categorized themselves as other. Persons enrolled in the participating classes were seeking either a credential or master's degree in the following areas: 18 Administration, 10 Counseling, 6 Curriculum and Instruction, 45 Clear Elementary Credential, 8 Clear Secondary Credential, 5 Learning Handicapped, and one individual did not indicate the credential/degree area.

Results

Religious and Study Groups. Of the 93 respondents, 9 percent stated that student-related religious groups meet before and after the instructional day (a permissible activity; Rapp, 1984), and 23 percent thought that such activities should be conducted. Student initiated religious

groups that met during the instructional day (unconstitutional; Rapp, 1984) existed at 4.3 percent of the respondents' schools; 11 percent of the respondents felt they should have such groups. Just 3 percent of the respondents reported studying the Bible during the instructional day (unconstitutional; Zirkel & Gluckman, 1982), and 10 percent thought Bible study should occur. Five percent of the respondents reported that schools supported a fellowship of Christian athletes (not addressed in the literature) and 26 percent agreed with such support. Although 58 percent thought students should enroll in academic study of religion (permissible; Valente, 1980), only 3 percent reported such study being conducted. When responding to the question regarding releasing students for religious instruction (permissible, Rapp, 1984), 22 percent reported such practices at their schools, and 37 percent stated that it should occur.

Prayer. None of the respondents reported that school prayer was required (unconstitutional; Zirkel & Gluckman, 1982), 3 percent thought such a requirement appropriate. While just 3 percent reported having voluntary prayers at student-led assemblies (unconstitutional; Zirkel & Gluckman, 1982), 27 percent thought students should pray voluntarily. Reciting a benediction/invocation at graduation that starts or closes with "in Jesus' name, let us pray" (no apparent

consensus; Schultz, 1983; Valente, 1980), was reported in 25 percent of the cases and 41 percent agreed that such benedictions should occur. When asked about a moment of silence for contemplation, meditation, or prayer (no apparent consensus; Rapp, 1984), 61 percent thought such a moment should be allowed, although only 11 percent reported such occurrences. None of the respondents reported student or teacher initiated prayer at the beginning of the instructional day (unconstitutional; Zirkel & Gluckman, 1982), although 10 percent thought it should occur. Similarly, no one reported a morning devotional reading over the public address system (unconstitutional; Rapp, 1984; Zirkel & Gluckman, 1982), but 6.5 percent agreed that schools should have such readings. Only 1 percent of the teachers responding indicated that the Lord's Prayer or other prayers (unconstitutional; Rapp, 1984; Schultz, 1983) were recited; 14 percent indicated that such recitations should occur. Only 2 percent of the teachers said that the Ten Commandments were posted (unconstitutional; Zirkel & Gluckman, 1982); however, 20 percent thought such posting should occur. Student athletes pray at 9 percent of the respondents schools' sporting events (not addressed in literature), and 29 percent of the respondents thought it an appropriate activity.

Christmas Celebrations. When asked to respond about Christmas, over one third (34.8%) of the teachers stated that they have Christmas observances with religious elements (permissible if both secular and religious elements are present), and over half (57 %) agreed that this was appropriate. Fourteen percent of the respondents stated that solely Christian religious music was sung at Christmas time (unconstitutional; Martin, 1976); sixteen percent thought that such music was appropriate. Twenty-seven percent said that schools displayed religious symbols such as crosses, menorahs or creches (no apparent consensus, Valente, 1980), while 35 percent said that they thought such displays should be incorporated. When questioned about depicting the Christian birth drama (unconstitutional; Martin, 1976), 18 percent reported that such activities occur and 45 percent felt they should. In addition to these results, one question related to holidays had to be discarded since it contained multiple elements and respondents were uncertain how to respond to it.

Guidelines. In the area of guidelines, only 21.5 percent of the respondents indicated that they had guidelines related to appropriateness of religious-related activities. Of those without guidelines, 52.5 percent thought they should be developed, and 81 percent stated they

would adhere to such guidelines. Of the respondents who have guidelines, 65.5 percent indicated that they follow them.

Comparison of What Occurs with What Teachers Thought Should Occur.

Chi square analyses were performed on each of the 19 items comparing what occurred to what teachers thought should occur. Significant differences occurred in 11 of the 19 items presented (Table 1). In each instance, the respondents favored inclusion of more religious-related activities than presently occurring in their schools. Significant differences occurred on the following items: Item 1. Having student initiated religious groups meet before or after the instructional day ($X = 6.779$, $p < .01$); Item 5. Releasing student for religious instruction ($X = 4.712$, $p < .05$); Item 8. Putting on a program depicting the Christian birth drama as opposed to Dicken's Christmas Carol ($X = 19.894$ $p < .0001$); Item 10. Having voluntary prayers at student-led assemblies ($X = 20.737$, $p < .0001$); Item 11. Allowing students to enroll in an academic study of religion and the Bible for the purpose of comparing religions ($X = 73.071$, $p < .0001$); Item 12. Supporting a fellowship of Christian Athletes ($X = 12.754$, $p < .001$); Item 13. Posting the 10 Commandments ($X = 14.563$, $p < .001$); Item 14. Allowing a moment of silence for contemplation, meditation,

or prayer ($X = 52.831$, $p < .0001$); Item 15. Having Christmas observance with religious elements ($X = 10.920$, $p < .001$); Item 19. Having a student volunteer or a teacher initiate prayers at the beginning of the instructional day ($X = 9.884$, $p < .001$); Item 20. Praying at sports events. ($X = 11.185$, $p < .001$).

Place Table 1 here

Discussion

Results indicate that although a majority of respondents want more religious-related activities, it seems that most teachers abide by the law when it comes to prayer and Bible reading in the schools. Despite the wish for more religious-related activities, prayer/Bible activities occurred in only 11% or fewer instances. Christmas celebrations, however, may be construed as an "American" holiday and part of the "American" culture (Hollander & Saypol, 1976). Many teachers may be unaware of the religious connotations and the psychological effect such celebrations have on non-Christian children. They may also be unaware that their actions may violate the law. Even if a law is not violated, it is important for counselors to raise the consciousness of educators and help them become aware that

not all children in their school are Christian and that some students might be told by their parents not to participate in Christmas celebrations, especially those with religious connotations. As counselors, we are well aware of peer pressure and the need to belong to a group. Regardless of the legality, youngsters should not be forced to choose between obeying their parents or giving up their culture and their religious beliefs. Counselors need to work with both the adults and young persons within the system to "insure that children may be accepted by their classmates yet remain true and proud of their history and religion." (Rosenthal, 1986)

It is noteworthy that only 21.5 percent of the respondents indicated they had guidelines related to appropriate religious-related activities and over 50 percent of the respondents thought such guidelines should be developed. Counselors can and should help administrators and teachers recognize the importance of protecting the rights of minority students and developing guidelines to do just that. If no guidelines exist in their schools, counselors might begin in this area. As Rosenthal (1986) states, "Educators must be made aware that continuing religious practices in public schools may make non-Christian children feel different, odd, or even bad."

In order to help in this area, counselors should become knowledgeable of the cultural and religious ways of

their counselees as well as the legal interpretation of the separation of church and state. As advocates for their counselees, counselors need to keep teachers and administrators informed about items such as: (a) possible dietary restrictions, (b) possible dress restrictions, and (c) dates of religious holidays and other special events. This may help teachers understand why a child may not participate in a particular activity, and also encourage teachers to try not to schedule examinations on days when the youngster will be absent. By so doing, teachers, counselors, administrators and other staff members may gain respect for diversity.

Students and teachers need to recognize that not all people are Christians and even some Christians do not celebrate in the same way. Counselors need to promote the development of a school environment that welcomes all individuals, and encourages religious liberty not tyranny. We live in a pluralistic society; we must be sensitive to diversity. Along with learning handicaps, sexism, racism, and ageism, religious freedom is a human rights concern for counselors.

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**TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF WHAT RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY OCCURS vs.
WHAT TEACHERS THINK SHOULD OCCUR**

Item	Occurrence	Yes	No	X
1. Having student initiated religious groups meet before or after the instructional day.	occurs should occur	8 21	76 63	6.779**
5. Releasing students for religious instruction	occurs should occur	20 33	63 50	4.712*
8. Putting on a program depicting the Christian birth drama as opposed to Dicken's <u>Christmas Carol</u>	occurs should occur	15 42	65 38	19.894***
10. Having voluntary prayers at student-led assemblies	occurs should occur	3 25	82 60	20.737***
11. Allowing students to enroll in an academic study of religion and the Bible for the purpose of comparing religions.	occurs should occur	2 53	76 25	73.072***
12. Supporting of a fellowship of Christian athletes	occurs should occur	5 22	74 57	12.755***
13. Posting of 10 Commandments	occurs should occur	2 18	83 67	14.563***
14. Allowing a moment of silence for contemplation, meditation, or prayer.	occurs should occur	10 56	74 28	52.850***
15. Having Christmas observances with religious elements	occurs should occur	31 52	50 29	10.920***

19. Having a student volunteer	occurs	0 91 9.884**
or a teacher initiate prayers	should occur	9 79
at the beginning of the		
instructional day.		

20. Praying at sports events	occurs	8 69 11.185***
	should occur	25 52

* = < .05
 ** = < .01
 *** = < .001
 **** = < .0001.